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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to offer a "fresh look" and to provide some further insights on teaching basic language skills with literature and composition-based "whole" language arts programs (this could include the Core Knowledge Foundation's literature), and on the time and attention this combination deserves in primary-level classrooms. According to experts, beginning students have spoken vocabularies ranging from 4,000 to 24,000 words, so that basal/workbook programs which teach about 175 mostly sight-memorized words in Grade 1 and use them, with necessary repetition, in "Dick and Jane"-type "literature" do not capture the attention of students. Dismissing the potential advantages the whole language movement offers is to ignore the opening reading reformers and explicit phonics and direct instructional advocates have been seeking for the past 70 years. Skills must be taught through direct instruction or work sheets, and direct instructional time permits the use of multi-sensory teaching techniques which address every "learning style" without discrimination. (NKA)

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WHICH BUILDS STRONGER LANGUAGE ARTS SKILLS -- WORKBOOKS OR DIRECT INSTRUCTION? WILL TEACHERS SPEND THEIR TIME DISPENSING CONSUMABLE WORKSHEETS OR IMPARTING SKILLS THROUGH DIRECT INSTRUCTION? THE CONTINUING DEBATE ASKS JUST HOW EXPLICIT PHONICS, CORRECT SPELLING, AND QUALITY LITERATURE OR COMPOSITION-BASED PROGRAMS FIT INTO THE TIME FRAME TEACHERS ARE GIVEN TO SOLVE THE LITERACY PROBLEM

by Myrna McCulloch

In December, 1996, the California Board of Education adopted an array of phonics and spelling workbooks offered by the giant "whole language" publishers. Two phonics-oriented methods and two "purist" whole language methods were thrown out. We, and other publishers who don't happen to have $25 million in slick, multi-colored "readers," of course, were excluded from the competition altogether.

Meanwhile, across town, in 1996, the California Legislature enacted legislation demanding and heavily funding the teaching of "explicit" phonics (cannot be taught from worksheets), phonemic awareness and correct spelling (difficult to teach from memorized lists to the non-visual learner) to be used with "decodable" texts (literature). Because of higher interest levels and an expanded vocabulary, whole language literature isn't usually "decodable" through incidental phonics taught from worksheets. The plot certainly thickens, but the primary questions, it seems to us, have yet to be addressed to satisfy the legislature, the state board, or the California Reading Task Force which labored mightily for one year and then demanded explicit phonics and correct spelling WITH whole language along with a strong recommendation to use one-half of the instructional day (grades 1 - 3) for nothing but language arts instruction. This report was completed just prior to the onset of the year-long adoption process.

It would appear that the State Department did nothing significant to bring the bid invitation into compliance with either the law or the wishes of the Task Force. Otherwise, how could the situation have ended in such dichotomous disarray? All of which brings me to our point of discussion -- what techniques are best used for "skills" instruction, and how can we save enough time to do it correctly? How does all this fit with whole language programs which the national press has oddly, but widely reported as being "thrown out" altogether in California?

Many teachers in both public and private schools now believe that whole language programs and philosophies are both dangerous and inadequate! Period! End of discussion. No doubt this is the result of much adverse, and mostly well-deserved, criticism of these popularly-used language arts programs which are not producing desired results with all students. California's fourth graders came up lowest in the nation in the NAEP assessments which triggered the investigative Task Force. We could end the debate, but there are two growing and important dimensions of whole language that I have not seen discussed.

I'd like to offer a fresh look and provide some further insights on teaching basic language skills with

literature and composition-based "whole" language arts programs, (this could include the Core Knowledge Foundation's literature by the way) and the time and attention this combination deserves in primary-level classrooms.

First, let me assure everyone that I am in complete agreement with objections to one particular whole language program entitled, Impressions by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. I believe their literature and student activity books have little redeeming literary value, plus they are dangerous in their heavy emphasis on violence, the occult, witchcraft, and just plain ugliness. I believe they are now in great disfavor across the country so this may be a moot point now. That is one question, one answer and one whole language program! There are others which do have acceptable, if not perfect, literature which brings us to the question of the method of instruction and time allotments for teaching language arts skills.

Beginning students have spoken vocabularies ranging from 4,000 to 24,000 words

The large, secular publishing houses which previously confined their efforts to the "basal" programs (hard cover readers with many consumable workbooks) have been producing whole language programs for about ten years. They had hoped to teach "integrated" language skills through early creative writing and exposure to vocabulary-rich literature designed to accommodate their students' speaking, listening and "interest" vocabularies. Remember, I said, "hoped."

The beginning child has a spoken, comprehensible vocabulary ranging from 4,000 to 24,000 words according to experts Chall, Flesch, and Seashore; their interest levels are keen, and, for many, the entire world is in their living rooms via television.

Basal/workbook programs which taught about 375 mostly sight-memorized words in grade one and used them, with necessary repetition, in *Dick and Jane*-type "literature," did not capture the attention of such children. Using worksheets, basal programs did teach about one-fourth of the known phonetic system over a 3- to 4-year period of time -- just enough to convince both parents and teachers *that they were teaching phonics.* Using worksheets with whole language literature will accomplish the same. It is too little, too late, too inefficient, discriminates against the non-visual learner, and it takes what little precious time teachers have for teaching or children for learning. Phonics by definition is first *auditory* as is training in phonemic awareness. Children and teachers must articulate the sounds together, first, in isolation; that means NOT with key words or pictures. Sounds go with symbols or the letters which stand for the sounds on paper. The English alphabet is a sound/symbol system. It is not a pictographic system! That is not merely my opinion; that is a fact! Phonics presented on worksheets is a *visual* drill usually employing both key words and pictures. It represents *implicit* phonics, not *explicit* phonics as the compiled research and California law now demand. *How* phonics is taught is probably more important than *what* phonics is taught, however, if we are concerned with correct spelling (and the legislature and

California Task Force were/are) then the phonetic organization becomes much more important. What was linguistically correct for spelling *and* pronunciation 70 and 80 years ago is still linguistically correct for spelling in spite of our Americanized speech patterns now legitimitized by nearly all dictionaries, i.e., the schwa was put into American dictionaries, generally, in the 1960's. It allows us to *pronounce* "uh" for the vowels a, e, i, and o in unstressed syllables. The problem is that doesn't help children learn how to spell the words as they, at one time, were also pronounced.

So, what sound/symbol relationships need to be taught? When should we teach them? How should we teach them? The questions, after some 60 years of heated, though undefined debate, are anything but resolved.

Until recently, most whole language authors admitted that they left phonics instruction out (except occasionally) claiming that children would learn to read and write (spelling is taught by whole-word memorization or "invention") by simply being "immersed in" or exposed to print. Apparently they know little of the neurological aspects of teaching reading, and of developing adequate auditory, verbal, visual, and motor cognitive skills. There is no known compiled research to support their theory, but it is based on the idea that if children learned to speak by being spoken to, they will learn print skills the same way. About fifteen per cent -- the visually gifted -- probably will. These children can almost do without a teacher; most could be put in a closet with a phone book and they would learn to read. And, strangely, this does not necessarily mean that they are more intelligent than those for whom remedial classes will likely triple in need, if not in reality.

All of which brings me to my point of digression from other whole language critics. In spite of the obvious "holes" in whole language programs, dismissing the potential advantages this movement has offered is to ignore the opening reading reformers and explicit phonics, and direct instructional advocates have been seeking for the past 70 years.

Time is the key word. What use teachers make of it is the question.

If we can agree that the end goals of whole language programs (successfully integrating all of the language strands and using them "across the curriculum"), are desirable goals, can we seriously believe they will be realized by returning to or staying with a system which requires completion of 8 to 10 work sheets a day? Will simple phonics alone do it? With or without work sheets? If texts are to be "decodable" (we're not against that), we must ask, "Decodable to what phonics standard?" Which philosophy best frees the teacher to use class time for research-validated "direct instruction" which imparts knowledge through Socratic questioning, engages students in give-and-take questions and answers, illustrates concepts, demands reasoning and analysis, the independent use of reference materials, and assigns and supervises varieties of practice for mastery, etc.?

If we like these teaching strategies, along with whatever is chosen for literature, how can we find the time for it in this period of increased curricular demands? If we believe students need basic skills -- phonetics, correct spelling, and legible handwriting -- to enable virtually all of them to achieve "whole," and integrated language arts *capabilities*, how can we best teach them? These skills can only be taught through direct instruction or with work sheets. There isn't time for both!

Teachers should not be turned into glorified stockroom clerks who spend their days passing out papers, picking up papers, grading papers, and sending the rest home to Mom. This consumable "paper blizzard" system was designed for one thing -- to benefit big publishers. We've all been hearing about our student's deficiencies in phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness must be taught by both students and teachers

articulating the sounds of the letters and the sounds of the combinations of letters which are the spelling patterns of English. The accompanying "graphemic awareness," constituting almost two-thirds of the phonics equation, cannot be dismissed by an over emphasis on just the phonemes. Dr. Linnea Ehri of CUNY (see a link to her research on the grapheme on our home page) tends to agree. If BOTH the sound/s and the symbol/s are not taught, it naturally follows that deficiencies will exist as surely as people who are nutritionally deficient will experience a myriad of physical health problems. The human mind needs adequate information and processing skills to function properly.

Skills must be taught through direct instruction or work sheets

Teachers want to teach *and* they deserve the opportunity to do so. Quality, uninterrupted time is absolutely essential to teach acute listening skills (with phonemic *and* graphemic awareness), precise speech, legible handwriting, and complete phonetics for correct spelling with the 47 rules of English orthography. The revised 71 Orton phonograms shown here cover the commonly-used correct English spelling patterns to encode the average fourth grade oral vocabulary and interest level:

a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, qu, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z, er, ir, ur, wor, ear, sh, th, ee, ay/ai, ow/ou, oy/oi, aw/au, ew/eu, ey/ei, ui, oo, ch, ng, ea, ar, ck, ed, or, wh, oa, ie, igh, eigh, wr, ph, dge, oe, kn, gn, tch, ti, si, ci, ough

Children can then master and enjoy the expanded vocabulary of interesting literature or other course work which entertains and educates, and in which all text will be "decodable." Long words are but short syllables, made of even shorter phonograms representing the 42 elementary English speech sounds. They can and will write easily and creatively (about yesterday's science project??) because they now have the requisite tools. Writing clarifies their own thinking. Analyzing the structure of sentences in the students' creative composition is a very efficient way to learn grammar, syntax, and analytical thinking. Comprehension "happens" because such children analyze, think, deduce, and create as they move through these integrated steps to mastery of their language. Once decoding is automatic, the mind "frees" for full comprehension. There is no possibility for full comprehension when the student still struggles with the automatic identity of each word.

Teaching all of the "strands" of the language arts (listening, speaking, penmanship, spelling, composition, reading, comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and thinking), and their companion auditory, verbal, visual, and motor cognitive sub-skills (these are accepted whole language goals), takes organization, skills, knowledge, and*the requisite time*.

Direct instructional time permits the use of multi-sensory teaching techniques which address every "learning style" without discrimination. Both basal/workbook and literature and composition-based programs alone, as they are written, teach primarily to the visually-oriented learner (only about 70%), and

this one-pronged approach has been going on for about seventy years. Auditory or kinesthetic learners , who sometimes have even higher intelligence than visual learners, may learn better by listening, verbalizing, and writing. We must stop discriminating against these learners for they can fail completely with basal, or whole language programs *as they are written*. Even those who can learn to read to a degree, often do not write, spell, or think. Millions fall into this category of semi-literacy.

"Invented" spelling, (ITA revisited?) has always gotten, and still gets, dismal long-term results because it programs the young mind with the wrong information [See Kids Brainpower] which is not easily erased. Many of these students are having great difficulty and some drop out of school labeled as "functionally" illiterate. The fortunate few who do learn still must live in a nation with citizens who can't read well enough to function in our technological society, and thus, they must bear the high cost of residence in a country less and less able to compete in the world marketplace due to an illiterate workforce. According to the 1994 National Education Goals Report, we now have 90 million such adults in the two lowest reading categories which, by many estimates, qualifies them as "functionally illiterate."

There are several steps involved in the creation of a highly literate population which could move U.S. students to top place in international competitions. First we must come to a recognition that language ability is a prerequisite for almost all other learning of significance. Language arts instruction should take precedence over all other disciplines in the early grades. As we have said, and to their great credit, the California Reading Task Force recommended that one-half of the instructional day, first through third grade, be spent on language arts. Bravo!! That alone, in this writer's opinion, would bring test scores up about 25 percentile points. To accomplish this, we must come to the realization that *teaching about the hole in the ozone layer* could conceivably wait until fourth grade. We must find a way to compromise our differing philosophies to bring our population to high English literacy, and then, for all other disciplines, we must:

. . . . . 1. Examine and set appropriate goals and standards (what are children learning in our very best schools? What could they learn with better methods and better teacher training?),
. . . . . 2. Place very high expectations on all students, and
. . . . . 3. Use research-validated teaching strategies and proven step-by-step instructional materials --

all with proper time management.

I submit that the *concept* of whole language programs has created the first real opportunity teachers have had to actually spend their time teaching since the insipid *Dick and Jane* readers, complete with workbooks, were introduced in the early 1930's. Though whole language authors have departed from validated methodologies in the "guessing" and "discovery" strategies they use, their stated "end goals" are neither incorrect nor undesirable. Teachers and schools are just beginning to realize the golden possibilities. A few are now seeking the supplementary materials and direct instructional training they need to fill in the gaps. They are going to private sector alternatives because the colleges of education are refusing to teach methodologies validated by the research. Meanwhile, teachers who are trained in the techniques of direct instruction would rarely opt to go back to the basal/workbook system OR implement a simple, phonics-only program. True literacy is more than the mere ability to read; one should be able to write, spell, to express himself/herself orally, and in writing, and to think. Since we are not naive enough to believe that the large publishing houses will disappear any time in the near future, we need to take full advantage of the obvious - this new opportunity to show them how to achieve the desirable language skills our students must have.

50 years ago, science, history and geography were not taught until grade four.

Time management, a critical factor for all schools of whatever size, at one time, wasn't the very serious problem it is today. Although this is another subject for another time, interestingly, about 50 years ago, many schools did not even teach science, social studies, health, etc., at all until grade four. Think about it! This was not to neglect these subjects, but rather to allow the serious time-on-task needed to teach the basic tools of learning (language arts) which then enabled students to independently pursue these,and any other areas of interest in their proper time frame. Somehow, probably through lobbying by the publishing world, we let that thought slip into oblivion and have been searching for answers ever since.

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